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IDITAROD - AN HISTORIC TRAIL

THE MALAMUTE LIMITED

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NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM

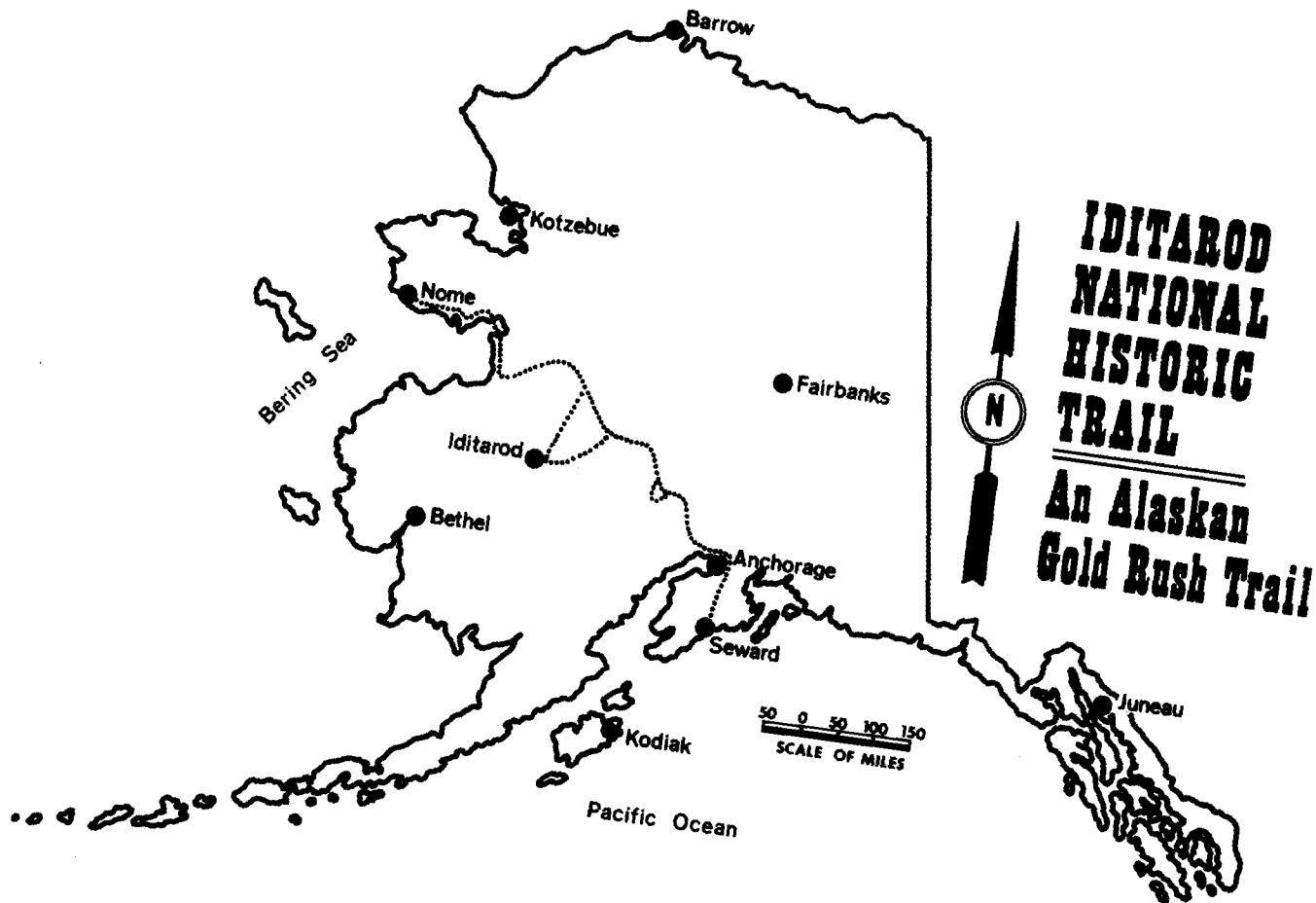
Trails are the evidence of man's first basic attempts to experience and explore the world around him. In the United States today, we recognize the importance of trails for outdoor recreation and our leaders have enacted a law which establishes a National Trails System to provide for the recreation needs of the people. It includes trails near the urban areas of the nation and trails within remote scenic areas.

When the National Trails System Act was passed in October 1968, Congress directed the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (renamed the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service) to determine if any of several Alaskan Gold Rush Trails should receive national recognition.

The study resulted in a recommendation to create a new category, trails of historic significance, and to designate the Iditarod Trail from Seward to Nome as a historic trail.

Naming the trail was just the start of the process of recognizing its importance to Alaska and the nation. The next step is the development of a management plan that will tailor interpretation of the trail to patterns of public use, accessibility, and trail ownership. During the planning, members of the public will be working with the Bureau of Land Management and a citizen's advisory council to analyze and develop alternatives for management of the trail.

The Iditarod was important long ago and it is important today because it offers the nation an isolated, primitive historic environment unique to the trails systems. Nowhere in the nation is there such an extensive landscape so demanding of durability and skill during the winter season of travel. On the Iditarod, today's adventurers can duplicate the experience and challenge of yesteryear.



TRAIL HISTORY

In the early days of exploration the things which brought people to Alaska were much the same as they are today, the wilderness itself and the riches it holds. Gold drew thousands of adventurers to the territory at the turn of the century to participate in the last stampede for that most precious of metals. Seeking the easiest route, most travelled in winter when the brush was covered with snow and the frozen lakes and rivers made ideal highways.

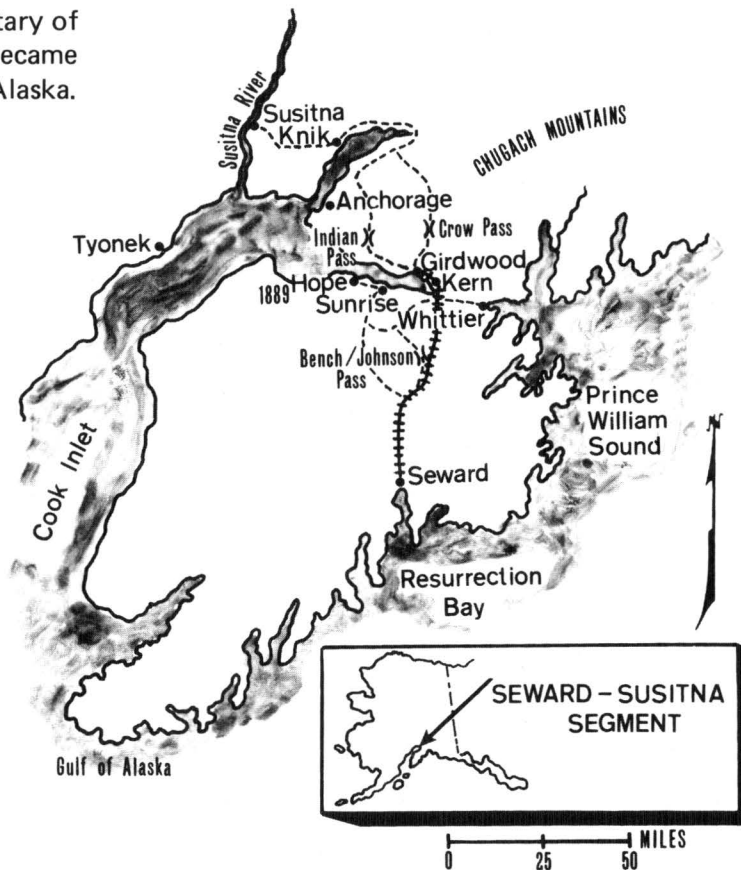
One major network of trails stretching 2,037 miles from Seward to Nome came to be known as the Iditarod Trail because of the activity and interest in the Iditarod mining district during the peak of the gold rush. Prospectors travelled up and down the trails following news of strikes. While summer traffic was mainly via boats and barges on the Yukon River, in winter traffic shifted to the trails. Those frozen by-ways were often as crowded as many a modern day main street.

The southern portion of the trail was first blazed in the late 1880's. Although the presence of gold had been noted by Russian explorers as early as 1830, it was the rich coal deposits which tempted the first American adventurers to sail up Cook Inlet. A number of mining districts were formed in the Homer area between 1880 and 1890, but no extensive coal extraction ever took place.

One of the first reports of gold was filed by Joseph Cooper, a miner and storekeeper, who panned at Cooper Creek (on the Kenai Peninsula) in 1884. The news in 1889 of a substantial find by an itinerant miner known only as "King" attracted a larger number of prospectors to a place called Sunrise. By 1895, 169 claims had been filed in the Hope-Sunrise district. Working a group of these claims a family firm, the Polly Mining Company, cleaned up \$40,000 in gold from their summer's efforts in 1896. When news of their luck reached civilization it prompted a stampede of more than 2,000 persons. They came by steamship and schooner to Valdez or Whittier and then crossed over dangerous mountain passes until 1906. The trip was easier when construction of the Alaska Northern Railroad was completed at an ice-

free port named for William Seward, the Secretary of the Interior who purchased Alaska. Seward became the funnel through which thousands entered Alaska.

SEWARD-SUSITNA SEGMENT



A second rush over this route occurred in 1898, probably caused by the Klondike stampede, which swelled the Cook Inlet area population to 7,000-10,000. Most were destined for Hope and Sunrise where they would find paystreaks already claimed. So they moved on around Turnagain Arm and over the Chugach Mountains to the trading centers of Susitna and Knik. Behind them the railroad pushed out from Seward offering an ever greater advantage to those who would come to the frontier.

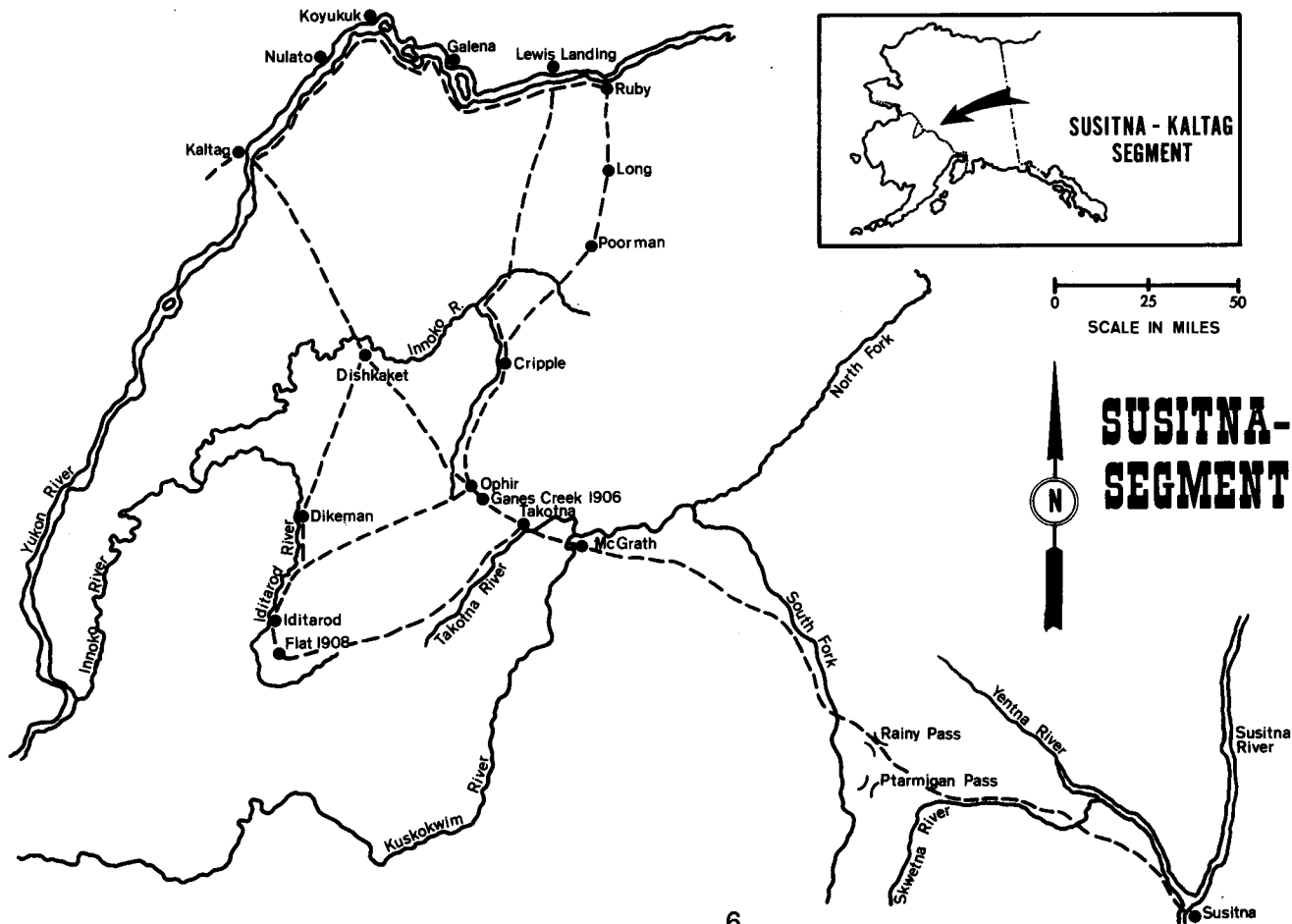
At the northern end of the route, the gold-bearing sands of Nome beach drew thousands of people during the same period as the Sunrise rush. In 1898, news of a strike at Anvil Creek, near Nome, drew miners from the Canadian Klondike down the Yukon River to Kaltag over the historic portage route to Unalakleet and around Norton Sound. Others came up the coast by steamer.

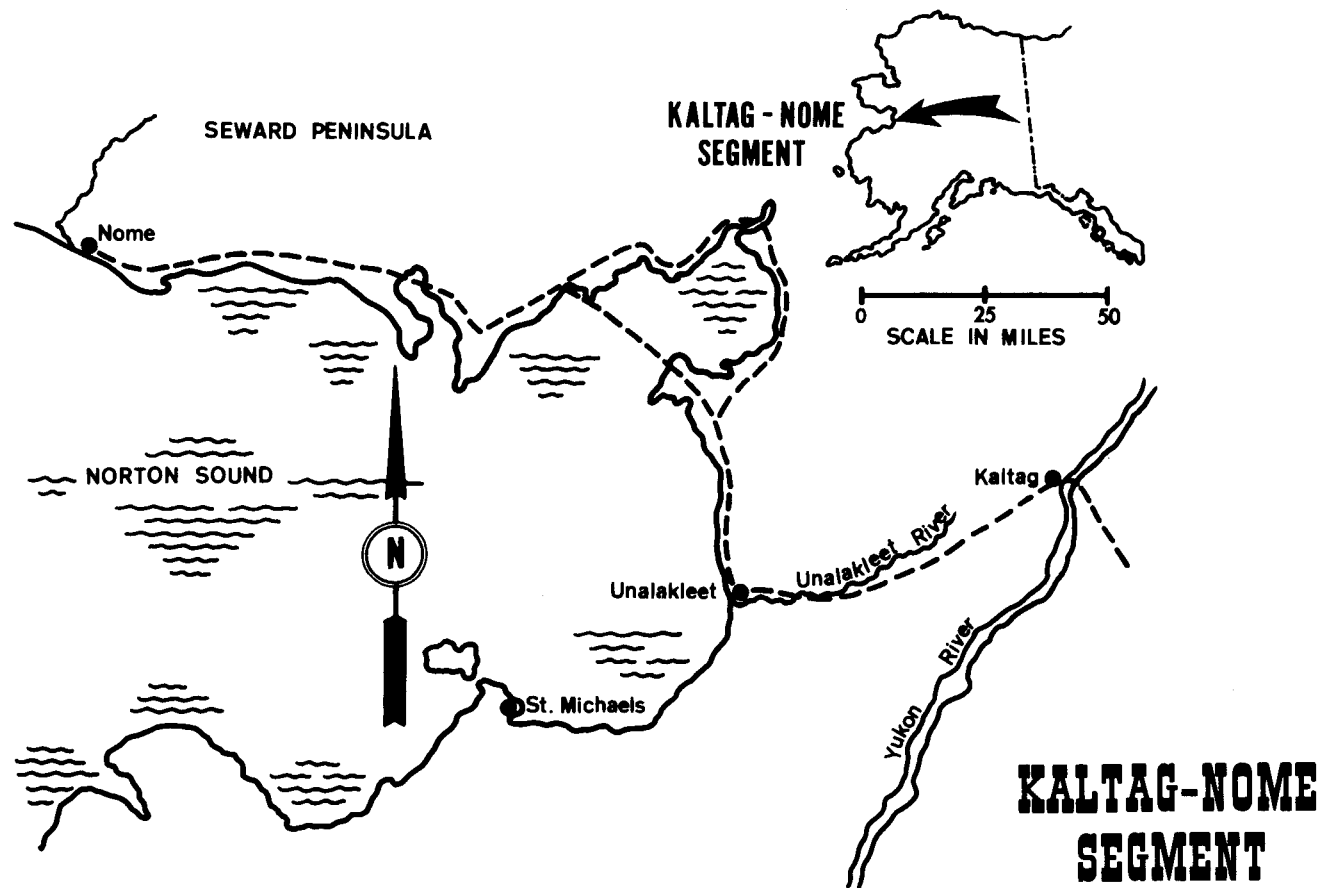
Nome quickly became Alaska's richest mining district with a population of 12,488 in 1900. To improve communications during the months when navigation was not possible a telegraph line was constructed in 1890 from Nome to Fort Gibbon (Tan-

ana) utilizing a sea cable between Nome and St. Michaels, the first in the territory.

Travel by white men into the upper Kuskokwim and Innoko River country before 1905 was limited to a few Russian explorers and an occasional military exploration party. The situation changed dramatically after Thomas Ganes struck gold on Ganes Creek in the upper Innoko drainage in the summer of 1906. That winter, news of the strike caused a stampede by miners mostly from along the Yukon River. These early rushers crossed overland from Kaltag and from the trading post of Lewis Landing on the Yukon. In subsequent years, mushers began their journey over the Iditarod from Seward and Knik. For a year, Moore City on Ganes Creek flourished. But then, a strike on nearby Ophir Creek early in 1908 left Moore City deserted and produced the town of Ophir.

All this activity prompted the Alaska Road Commission in February 1908 to survey a new trail from Seward to Nome that would provide overland access to the gold fields. Led by W. L. Goodwin, the survey party began at the railhead, 54 miles north of





Seward, crossed over Crow Pass, around Knik Arm to Knik, through Ophir to Nome. Tripods were placed along the route to mark the trail.

Almost as fast as the trail was surveyed, enterprising young men and women began staking out sites for roadhouses along the way. Those that were actually built and utilized were spaced about a day's journey apart. At the start of the trail the distance was about 14 miles, farther up the trail the distance widened. These inns were vital to the goldrushers for they meant a warm fire, shelter and a hot meal after a day on the trail when the temperatures could reach -50 degrees.

Iditarod's turn to attract the attention of the world came while Goodwin was still about his work. On Christmas Day 1908 two prospectors, W. A. Dikeman and John Beaton struck gold on Otter Creek, a tributary of the Haiditarod River. Soon the Iditarod district boasted four major towns and 2,500 people. The town of Iditarod itself had a telephone system, a makeshift wooden railway, two newspapers, four banks, a fire hall, nine saloons, a school, and a church.

During the winter of 1910, the Alaska Road



Historic Roadhouse on the Seward Peninsula. (From "Iditarod Trail Annual" by Dorothy Page, photo provided by Lillian Carmichael)



Iditarod townsite, a booming community in the 1910's, was deserted by 1921. (Photo from the Archie Lewis Collection in the Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)

Commission marked and cleared nearly 1,000 miles of trail from the Alaskan Northern railhead at Kern Creek, 71 miles north of Seward, to Nome. This included much work on the many branch routes that connected small mining communities with the main trail.

Though portions of the trail, such as the Kaltag-Unalakleet portage, were used by Eskimos and Athabaskan Indians for hundreds of years before the white man came to Alaska, the Iditarod and its many branch trails saw the heaviest use from 1896 to the 1920's. Mostly a winter trail, the section from Seward to Knik served as a mail and supply route until the extension of the railroad to Nancy (north of Knik) around 1918 when many portions of the original trail were abandoned. The Knik to Kaltag section saw heavy use from 1910 to 1920 and nearly three million dollars in gold was brought out over the trail.

Mail carriers to Ophir and Iditarod utilized the Seward-Knik trail between 1914 and 1919 and again during the winter of 1920-21. In other years the mail contracts to the gold fields were won by carriers

using the Valdez to Fairbanks route. From Fairbanks the mail was carried down the Yukon River to Kaltag and then on to the gold fields, including Nome. A series of dog teams running in relay could carry the mail between the railroad at Nenana and Nome in one to two weeks.

The importance of the Iditarod Trail as a link with the outside world was emphasized in 1925 when a diphtheria epidemic threatened the little town of Nome. A relay of 20 dogmushers and their teams rushed the precious serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome in a record 127½ hours during the cruelest winter weather conditions. That was the "trail's" last great moment in Alaska, for air transportation would supplant the dog team as mail carrier in the coming years.

Although the advent of air travel decreased the isolation of the mining towns, activity peaked in the early 20's. As the big mining companies moved in, mining lost the glamour and high stakes that drew individual adventurers north. World War I siphoned off much of the available manpower for a time slowing the growth of towns like Ophir and Flat, but it



One of the early race teams. (From "Iditarod Trail Annual" by Dorothy Page, photo provided by Lillian Carmichael)

was the World War II ban on gold mining which really shut down the town. When the war ended, full scale mining did not resume because the fixed price of gold could not support the cost of mining.

THE IDITAROD TRAIL TODAY

Today some portions of the trail are much the same as in the gold rush era, but other sections are overlain by highways and rail lines. Most of this development has occurred on the southern portion of the trail from Seward to Knik. West of Knik and the Alaska Range, no portion of the trail is accessible by the major highway net although there are a few local roads which may cross or parallel it. What remains of this section of the trail has been all but abandoned. Little development has occurred and an isolated primitive quality still exists.

Only a few portions of the trail are passable in summer. The Crow Pass trail through the Chugach Mountains, north of Girdwood, is maintained by the U.S. Forest Service as is the 22-mile Johnson Pass trail in the Kenai Peninsula. A 20-mile winter ski trail over Indian Creek Pass has been improved by the Alaska Division of Parks to accommodate summer hiking use. Another 20-mile trail within Chugach State Park was re-established in 1975 by an Anchorage area Girl Scout Council along the historic Eagle River Valley which connects with the Forest Service Crow Pass Trail.

In winter, vast sections of the trail are used by villagers for access between villages and to areas of subsistence hunting and fishing. In addition the 1,049-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is run annually using many portions of the original Iditarod route. This race was first run in 1973 to commemorate the historic trail and the important role the sled dog played in opening up the Alaskan frontier.

Today's winter adventurer can experience the challenge of travel in Alaska much as it was three-quarters of a century ago.



An Iditarod Trail Race musher nears Rohn River cabin, north of Rainy Pass. The annual race attracts competition from Alaska, the lower 48, and Canada. (Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service Photograph)

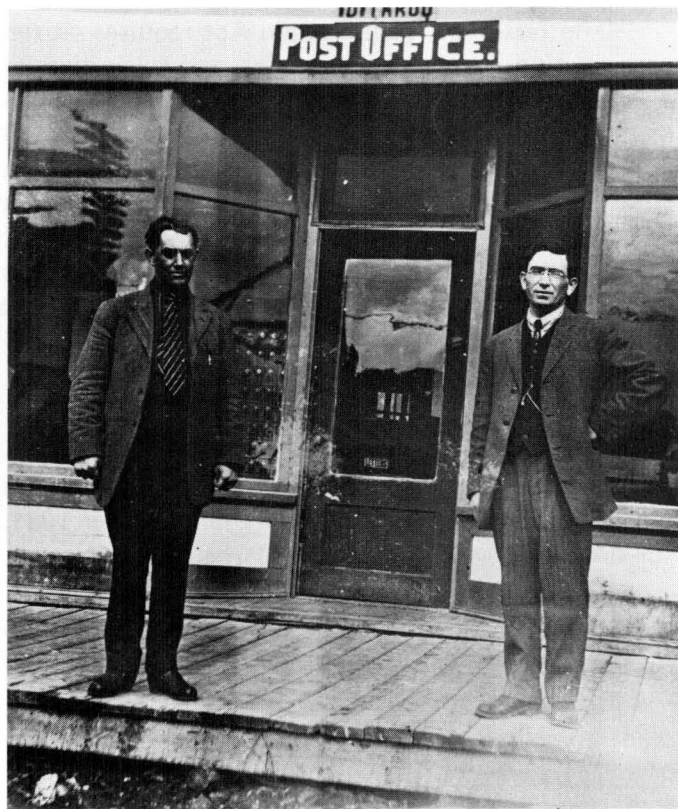
Some of the gold which drew people over the trail at the turn of the century is still there as are many other valuable minerals. Mining continues on a small scale in the Ophir, Takotna, Flat, and Poor-man areas. In addition exploration for fossil fuels is increasing.

Remnants of the past do exist along the route, though time, weather, and souvenir seekers have taken their toll on the towns and roadhouses which once bustled with activity. Only a few of the old roadhouses are still standing. Some of the original marker tripods and mail cabins are also thought to exist along the trail. An intensive survey of historic structures associated with the Iditarod Trail has been initiated by the Bureau of Land Management.

Five sites along the trail are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Hope Historic District, Old St. Nicholas Church at Eklutna, the town of Knik, Iyateyet Site at Cape Denbigh, and the Anvil Creek placer mine near Nome. In addition, the Iditarod townsite, now a ghost town, has been nominated to the Register pending approval by the Doyon Native Regional Corporation.



Sluice box being worked in the Iditarod Mining District.
(Photo from private collection of Dehn Welch)



Iditarod Post Office, 1914. (Photo from Alaska Historical Library Collection)

In addition to its historic significance, the Iditarod Trail route has high scenic qualities, as it parallels swift streams, traverses breathtaking mountain ranges and dense forests. It winds through muskeg and marshes in some of the most primitive country in the nation. But because it is a winter trail some of its natural scenic treasures are not readily accessible. For example, when Norton Sound comes alive with wildflowers, berries, and returning salmon and birds, much of the trail vanishes with the ice and snow.

Ownership of the land which the trail crosses is shared primarily by the federal and state governments and private landowners at present. From Seward north to Girdwood the trail follows the federally-owned Alaska Railroad through the Chugach National Forest. There it enters Chugach State Park. From Knik to the Alaska Range the trail traverses state lands. The bulk of the land west of the Alaska Range is currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The most significant block of private land is in the Knik area.

Where the trail passes through Native selected

lands, ownership will be transferred to the village or regional corporation under the terms of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The Bureau of Land Management has recommended that in such cases the trail be reserved with an easement for public use. Native land managers collectively will manage a significant portion of the trail.

HISTORIC TRAIL MANAGEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management has been designated by the Secretary of the Interior to be overall coordinator for the Iditarod National Historic Trail management planning. During the drafting of the comprehensive plan, the Bureau will be closely coordinating input from federal, state, borough, municipalities, corporations, villages, and other interested groups and individuals.

The National Trails System Act requires citizen participation in the development and execution of a trail plan through an advisory council. Council membership includes representatives of each federal and independent agency administering land through which the trail passes, as well as the State of Alaska and individuals or organizations having an interest in the Iditarod Trail. This group will set standards and make recommendations for management of the trail, trail signs, and maintenance for federally managed portions of the route.

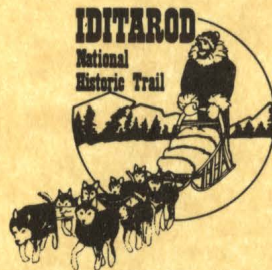
The comprehensive plan which will be the product of many agencies, organizations, and individuals will be sent to Congress no later than October 1981, for final approval.

Once approved by Congress, each land manager having administrative responsibilities for portions of the Iditarod National Historic Trail will have management guidelines which will set specific objectives and practices to be observed in the management of the trail.





Cross country skiers along trail in Alaska Range. (Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service photo)



IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL PROJECT OFFICE

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